The good, the bad and treatment of diabetes

Miguel Abad Vila

Diabetes has a leading role in the current global epidemic of non-communicable diseases. But it has a rather ambiguous relationship with the ‘seventh art’. On the one hand, diabetes has made a number of high-profile appearances in blockbuster movies – which has helped to raise its profile among the general public. On the other, it remains underrepresented – only around a dozen films have dealt with the condition in the past 25 years – and is often distorted by the time it reaches the screen.

Miguel Abad Vila reviews the portrayal of diabetes by various filmmakers and discusses the film industry’s duty to present diabetes accurately and responsibly.
the ugly – in the cinema

 Argentinean director, Ernesto Parysow’s 1998 drama, Punto de Equilibrio (Balance Point), is an example of ‘good practice’ in the on-screen depiction of diabetes. Indeed, it stands out in the history of the condition’s relationship with filmmakers. A well-crafted film that leads the audience through the multiplicity of challenges facing people with diabetes, Punto de Equilibrio is as emotionally engaging as it is educational. Complex and difficult diabetes-related issues are brought to life accurately and thoughtfully through the experiences of a number of characters who are affected in different ways – from early symptoms of type 1 diabetes, through social stigma and guilt, to life-threatening complications.

 Edward Lachman’s 2008 documentary, Life for a Child, also comes highly recommended. This stirring film follows the journeys of children with type 1 diabetes through the streets and mountains of Nepal, one of the world’s poorest countries. Produced by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) and Eli Lilly and Company, Life for a Child was made specifically to raise awareness of the devastating impact of diabetes and increase support for the IDF Life for a Child initiative. It won critical acclaim in the Tribeca Film Festival (2008), Vienna (2008), Heartland (2008) and Festival du Nouveau Cinéma de Montréal (2009).

 The latest in IDF’s Life for a Child series, Lifeblood, which highlights the struggle of children with type 1 diabetes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was premiered recently in Stockholm.

 But what of the broader film industry’s efforts with diabetes? A few works from the past 25 years or so stand out for their treatment of diabetes and, because of their enormous box-office success, their potential impact on the knowledge and attitudes of the general cinema-going and DVD-watching public.

 **Steel Magnolias**
 Steel Magnolias (Herbert Ross, 1989) is a bittersweet comedy that weaves some highly emotive diabetes-related issues into a story about a close-knit circle of friends whose lives come together at a beauty salon in a small town in the southern USA. Diabetes provides plenty of drama. In one scene, Shelby, played by Julia Roberts, is seen feverish and disoriented during a severe hypoglycaemic episode, fighting an offer of orange juice from her mother, M’Lynn (Sally Field). Later, M’Lynn is upset at the news that her daughter is pregnant, despite her doctor’s advice. While Shelby’s insistence that women with diabetes have babies ‘all the time’, her mother disagrees, insisting that ‘There are limits to what you can do.’ At the end of the film, Roberts’ character dies due to diabetes-related kidney failure.

 **The Godfather**
 In a personal favourite of mine, Coppola’s The Godfather III, the leader of a mafia family has type 2 diabetes. Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) suffers a hypoglycaemic episode during a particularly stressful time in his life. “When I’m under stress, sometimes this happens,” Michael Corleone tells a cardinal (Ralf Vallone) while drinking orange juice and eating snacks to raise his blood glucose. The cardinal’s reply is disarmingly accurate, given what we know about the associations between stress and diabetes: “Your mind suffers and the body cries out!”

 As his diabetes develops, Michael requires insulin therapy. Finally, type 2 diabetes-related vascular damage is the probable cause of his death – as it was for his father before him, and indeed for the author of the original Godfather novels, Mario Puzo.

 **Nothing in Common**
 In Nothing in Common (Garry Marshall, 1986), Max Basner, played by Jackie Gleason, struggles with his
diagnosis of diabetes and finally undergoes the amputation of some toes and part of a foot – a cruel outcome of the microvascular and neuropathic complications of poorly managed diabetes. The storyline was based on the personal experiences of the film’s scriptwriter Rick Podell, who had cared for his own late father, who had diabetes.

Panic Room
Cinematographic illustrations of people with diabetes are often used to satisfy the filmmaker’s need for high drama. In Panic Room (David Fincher, 2002), the two main characters, played by Jodie Foster and Kristen Stewart, are a mother and her insulin-dependent daughter, who are being hunted by a group of criminal intruders. They become trapped in an armour-protected safe room in the basement of their home. Rather predictably, they have no access to the daughter’s life-saving medication. But dramatic licence is so stretched in this thriller that it becomes a feast for spotting diabetes-related goofs and errors.

For example, although the girl is seen eating high-carbohydrate pizza and drinking high-sugar (regular) Coca Cola at the beginning of the film, she develops low blood glucose later the same evening. The mother begs the criminals to be allowed access to her daughter’s insulin; it is made clear that the girl will die from hypoglycaemia if she does not receive an injection! At the climax of the action, the character with diabetes warns that if he does not “get my shot in the next couple of hours, somebody’s gonna be sending flowers to my mother”. Near the end of the film, the man appears to be exhibiting signs of low blood glucose, despite the lack of insulin – which should have resulted in high glucose. ‘I’m dead in two hours,’ he says. After the plane lands, he is given an insulin injection, after which he immediately regains strength and stamina.

Con Air
Another thriller in which the film-makers seem to be confused about the difference between hypo- and hyper-glycaemia is Con Air (Jerry Bruckheimer, 1997), where difficulties treating an inmate with diabetes trigger a mutiny onboard an aeroplane transporting dangerous prisoners. The depiction of diabetes here is unrealistic and exaggerated to the point of absurdity. At one point, the character with diabetes warns that if he does not “get my shot in the next couple of hours, somebody’s gonna be sending flowers to my mother”. Near the end of the film, the man appears to be exhibiting signs of low blood glucose, despite the lack of insulin – which should have resulted in high glucose. ‘I’m dead in two hours,’ he says. After the plane lands, he is given an insulin injection, after which he immediately regains strength and stamina.

Research and responsibility
It could be argued that a film is made to entertain rather than to educate – to allow an audience to escape from reality rather than to dwell upon its complex, ugly or painful aspects. Moreover, it is true that the film-watching public has a degree of responsibility in choosing whether or not to accept what happens in a film as fantastic or verisimilar. But viewers very probably will have left the cinema with the impression that this girl suffering hypoglycaemia was saved by a shot of insulin.

Steel Magnolias, a success at the box-office and well received by critics, depicted the dramatic impact that diabetes has on people’s lives and the tragedy that this sometimes involves. The hypoglycaemia scene was realistic up to a point but it could be argued that it was overdramatized – an extreme example of what could happen. The on-screen response to hypoglycaemia in Panic Room is not only inaccurate, it sends out a potentially dangerous message: insulin, of course, lowers blood glucose. For a person with hypoglycaemia, an insulin injection administered by well-meaning but clueless friend really could be The End.

It is unfortunately the case that many people encounter ‘diabetes education’ only through the storyline of a film or television programme; many people really do believe what they see. How many diabetes-unaware people, having seen Steel Magnolias, still believe that women with diabetes should not have a baby? We should welcome films that bring to the public’s attention the potentially terrible nature of diabetes but writers and directors must do the proper research if they are to avoid spreading the epidemic of confusion already surrounding diabetes.

Miguel Abad Vila
Miguel Abad Vila is a General Practitioner at the Centro de Saúde Novoa Santos in Ourense, Spain (miguel.abad.vila@sergas.es). He is the author of the blog Medycine (http://medicinacycine.blogspot.com/).